New Fiction

Continued from Page Nineteen.

medicated fiction, the moralization interferes with the artistry of the product. The thesis seems to be that the aristocratic British politician, or statesman, is more or less of a criminal, and that it becomes necessary to wink at his incidental crimes, including murder, for the good of the community. It lacks the former Chestertonian lightness of touch, and is even clumsy at times. Its obvious exaggeration tends also to defeat its aim. When we are asked to contemplate Prime Ministers, Chancellors of the Exchequer, and similarly lofty officials strangling blackmailers with their own hands or conniving at all sorts of crime it strains one to the point of boredom.

Nevertheless the stories are, most of them, well enough made to be highly interesting, as plots or mystery yarns. It is chiefly in their saturnine moralizations that they go astray. Mr. Chesterton is far too skilled a raconteur to fail in holding the reader's attention, and there is a considerable alloy of the familiar Chestertonian wit, irony, and paradox to give value to the whole mixture. And, as if to show how much better he can do, there is added to the political stories a separate novelette, "The Trees of Pride," wherein Chesterton shows almost at his best, especially in the quality of eeriness in the handling of the supernatural, the moral of this one being that perhaps there is sometimes more truth in superstitions than the matter of fact critic can see.

The political mystery stories center upon the person of Mr. Horne Fisher, the "man who knew too much," who combines the capacities of a super-sleuth with a fund of political pessimism. Fisher is related to most of the aristocracy, owning a large assortment of cousins in high office. He has been behind the scenes from his youth, and knows all the wrongnesses, scandals and crimes of several decades. He generally uses this uncanny knowledge at the critical moment for the shielding of the criminal, always in the interests of the State. "All the seamy side of things," he says, bitterly, "all the secret reasons and rotten motives and bribery and blackmail they call politics. I needn't be so proud of having been down all these sewers that I should brag of it." And he ends by murdering his own uncle, for the good of the threatened British Empire. It makes a queer mess, often curiously interesting, but on the whole too much askew to be really impressive.

Another note is added in the tale of "The Hole in the Wall," in which a moderately inoffensive young nobleman is murdered, apparently by way of poetic justice, because his ancestors, four hundred years before, had taken part in the looting and sequestration of the ecclesiastical properties. The troubles of modern England appear to be due, in part at least, to the "mockery of the dear, quaint old Middle Ages"; that is, a revolt from the Church. "It needs very little poking about in the past to find that hole in the wall, that great breach in the defenses of English history. It lies just under the surface of a thin sheet of sham information and instruction." So, back to Rome, if we would be saved. Mr. Chesterton is an engaging phenomenon, but he hardly appears at his best in this volume.

GEORGE WOOD.

THE NEW DECAMERON. By Bill Nobbs and others. Brentano's.

THIS is the third—and thus far the best—volume in the rather ambitiously labeled experiment in composite fiction by a number of the leading lights among British story writers. Besides the versatile Bill Nobbs the authors responsible for this number are Compton Mackenzie, J. D. Beresford, D. H. Lawrence, Desmond Coke, Michael Sadleir, Norman Davey, Storm Jameson, Robert Keable and V. Sackville West—and these be names good to conjure with, on both sides the Atlantic. Naturally the component short stories show a wide range and fine variety, but they are all chiefly notable for their up to date cleverness. Even Michael Sadleir's "Victorian Tale," while it is Victorian enough in its plot and in its superficial manner, is nevertheless very much of to-day in its underlying motivation; it is, indeed, extraordinarily clever in its imitation, but one suspects that it could have been done only by one of the very newly matured generation.

Readers of the earlier volumes will remember that the tales are strung together mechanically as episodes in a pilgrimage of a very modern aggregation of travelers on an unconventional trip through Europe, under the leadership of Mr. Hector Turpin, manager of "Turpin's Temperamental Tours"—a form which makes any kind of story possible—the time tested scheme of the classic Canterbury pilgrims, the Arabian Nights and others, as well as of Boccacio. The success in keeping the total effect of a certain unity in diversity is remarkable. The best of it remains with the more whimsical, as in Desmond Coke's tale of "The Faithful Friend," which records the downfall—or escape, as you prefer—of an English schoolmaster because of his friendship with an impossible mongrel dog. Dramatic and powerful as it is, one feels that Storm Jameson's story, "The Pitiful Wife," is something of an intrusion; not exactly a false note, but still not quite "in the picture." More consonant to the broader theme is Norman Davey's "La Chambre des Mille Paons," which is the kind of thing that few English writers can do successfully, as it calls for the touch of a De Maupassant, and one cannot express admiration for the virtuosity of it in any better way than to say that De Maupassant would have been probably willing to father it. The book as a whole is richly entertaining.

FROM A BENCH IN OUR SQUARE. By Samuel Hopkins Adams. Houghton Mifflin Company.

MR. ADAMS displays a ripe geniality in this book, which tends a little toward making the best of everything in this best of all possible worlds, running a bit toward Pollyannaism, but stopping short of the danger point. The book is made of a series of eight short stories, each a separate entity, but so woven together as to make a fairly coherent and consecutive whole. The mechanics of it are excellent; the machine moves without clanking. It centers upon an old fellow on a park bench to whom various developments come; episode after episode, but interrelated. He is compared to an insect eating orchid; stories settle upon him and are duly digested. As to the prevailing optimism, it seems sometimes as if his people were going through the motions of tragedy, but always with a reservation in their minds that the thing is sure to end in a smile. But the smile is, on the whole, justified, and there is never anything cheap or forced about it.

There is possibly a little conscious twisting of the plots into eccentric whirls, to get away from the commonplace, but here again the success of the process justifies it. There is a quality measurably comparable to that of Chambers's "King in Yellow" in the skillful handling of the grotesque in a mingling with the slightly humorous and pathetic.

Mr. Adams is always the highly conscientious artist in expression, and he has reached a very high degree of finish in these stories, although one is sometimes a little too conscious of their artistry in its detail, which tends toward a slight overelaboration, though it never becomes annoyingly mannered. As subtle character studies the various folk of the book are warmly interesting, always vitalized if somewhat accentuated personalities.

MOTHER MACHREE. By Martin J. Scott, S. J. The Macmillan Company.

IT is a fact, known to many newspaper men and authors, too, that in all most every novel ever written there is to be found a good news story. This is true in many cases and especially in that of "Mother Machree," a beautifully written and authentic story of a boy. There is a deep religious feeling throughout the book, which is thoroughly Catholic in doctrine. The story is that of Barney Kenney, a lad of nine who is gifted with a "birdlike" voice and who loved to use it. (John McCormack said that the hero in real life had "a voice that was all soul.") Barney always felt that his mother, "who was the best singer in all Ireland," was listening from her place in Heaven to every note that flowed from his lips.

The book is titled "Mother Machree" because Barney sings his way into Father Boone's heart and the boy choir he sponsored through John McCormack's

Continued on Following Page.